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ABSTRACT

A British study investigating claims that foreign language education instills positive attitudes in students about the target culture is described. Attitudes of students in the last year of elementary school, before second language instruction begins, and students of French in the third year of secondary school, the last year of obligatory language instruction, were informally measured through interviews, observation, and surveys. Analysis of the results is in progress. An illustration of one portion of the analysis focuses on the secondary students' knowledge of an ordinary meal in France, assessed in interviews, and the sources of their information in and outside of class. Project results will be presented as descriptive models of the relationships among data from the various sources. Bases for critiquing the models are discussed. (MSE)

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Language Learners' Perceptions of a Foreign Culture - the Teacher's Role

(Summary of a paper presented at AILA 90, Greece, April 1990)

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Overview
1 - the purposes of foreign language teaching, especially 'cultural learning'
2 - overview of the research and data types
3 - an illustration of learners' knowledge and the impact of teaching
4 - models of teaching and learning about other peoples and cultures

1 Introduction: the purposes of foreign language teaching

The project I will discuss was carried out at the University of Durham from 1985-88 and will be published in late 1990'. It started from a concern with and a worry about the direction which much foreign language teaching seems to have taken in the 1970s and 1980s, namely the emphasis on language as skill and on the purpose of language teaching as being to transfer messages and carry out transactions between people from different countries. This approach ignores both the cultural meaning of even the simplest messages and the contribution of language teaching to learners' - especially young learners' - general education. With respect to the former, the attempt to give learners a skill for use in real situations it is anticipated they will meet, can be counter-productive if not dangerous if they do not understand the cultural import of the message they are attempting to share with their interlocutor. With respect to their general education, it is particularly evident in Britain, where learners do not anticipate their future needs for foreign language learning being sufficient to justify spending long hours of their young lives, that the contribution of language teaching to their education as human beings living in a multicultural country and international community is at least as important as the attempt to equip them with 'practical skills'. I am also convinced that this is not a phenomenon limited to Britain.

That I am not alone in this view of language teaching is clear from some documents from the 1970s and increasingly from the 1980s. For example the British inspectors of education published the following view in 1985:

> Foreign language study .... offers insight into another culture and as such is concerned with the human and social areas of experience. Throughout the course pupils can be encouraged to view the familiar from a different angle, not least in terms of people's behaviour, and thereby widen horizons and break down feelings of insularity.
> (HMI, 1985: para.52)

It is also especially noteworthy that the Council of Europe - so influential in the last two decades - has, in its next programme of work, given particular prominence to the notion of 'European citizenship' which depends upon "mutual understanding and respect and upon effective person-to-person communication across traditional linguistic boundaries"((CDCC (88) 33, May 1989).

It would be possible to cite similar purposes from other countries, for example "Les Instructions Officielles" in France for the teaching of German

> "L'objectif de l'enseignement de l'allemand est culturel, éducatif et linguistique.

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> L'enseignement de l'allemand met les élèves en rapport avec les faits de civilisation propres aux pays de langue allemande. Il fait découvrir les réalités de la vie quotidienne, l'organisation politique, sociale et économique de la cité, la vie artistique, littéraire et culturelle proporement dite (...)
> Le constat par les élèves de la diversité des civilisations et des comportements qui s'y attachent leur permet d'accepter plus facilement les différences dans un esprit pluraliste. L'enseignement de l'allemand contribue ainsi au développement du jugement et du raisonnement.
> (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 1985: 95)

For English teachers and learners, there is also a very recent document of particular significance, in which proposals for a new national curriculum for language teaching are put forward. Here too the "educational purposes" are listed and include:

> "to offer insights into the culture and civilisation of the countries where the language is spoken
> to encourage positive attitudes to foreign language learning and to speakers of foreign languages and a sympathetic approach to other cultures and civilisations
> to develop the pupils' understanding of themselves and their own culture"
> (Modern Foreign Languages Working Group, 1990: 4-5)

In these and other documents, two concepts are discernible under various different terms

- insight/understanding/jugement/ raisonnement
- respect/sympathy/positive feelings/esprit pluraliste

There are thus both cognitive and affective dimensions to the effect that language teaching in an educational context is intended to have on learners' development as human beings.

2 Overview of the research and data types

The question which our research addressed was whether the claims for these desirable effects fo language teaching are justified. We wanted to gather empirical evidence to put the assumptions of these and other texts - assumptions also voiced by teachers - to the test.

As a first step however we also hypothesised that the effects of language teaching must be seen within the context of influences from outside the foreign langauge classroom, influences from parents and family, from friends and acquaintances, from the media, from travel and so on. We had therefore four concepts: attitudes to foreign people and cultures, perceptions of foreign people and countries, foreign language teaching and extra-school experience. And our purpose was to establish what relationships might pertain between those concepts. The operationalisation of the concepts and the instruments devised for collecting data are represented in figure 1.1. The design of the research was essentially a comparison of two cohorts of pupils, before and after beginning to learn a foreign language. The language chosen was French, above all because it is the most widely taught in England. The cohorts were taken from the final year of primary school, where no foreign language is taught, and the third year of secondary school, which was the final year of obligatory learning of a foreign language. Data were gathered from the third year pupils in two secondary schools and from a corresponding number of pupils in related primary schools. Data were also gathered about the teaching of French, by classroom observation, by textbook analysis and by interviews with teachers. The design is summarised in figure 1.2.

The data gathered thus consisted of the following kinds:

- responses to an attitude test for all pupils
- transcripts of informal recorded interviews with approximately half the pupils
- fieldnotes from observations of lessons in both secondary schools
- analysis of the textbook used in both schools
- responses to a questionnaire for all pupils
- transcripts of interviews with French teachers in both secondary schools.

Analysis of the data:

- ATTITUDE TESTS RELATED STATISTICALLY TO:
  - EXPOSURE TO FRENCH TEACHING
  - SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS
  - GENDER
  - VISITS ABROAD AND TO FRANCE IN PARTICULAR
  - PARENTAL INTEREST IN LANGUAGE LEARNING
  - FAMILY LIVING ABROAD
  - ETC

- INTERVIEWS ANALYSED TEXTUALLY BY :
  - ATTITUDES TO FOREIGN PEOPLE AND CULTURES AND TO LANGUAGE LEARNING
  - KNOWLEDGE OF ASPECTS OF THE FOREIGN CULTURE
  - SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES RECOUNTED BY PUPILS
  - TOTAL SHARED KNOWLEDGE OF A SCHOOL CLASS

- CLASSROOM OBSERVATION:
  - SELECTED LESSONS IN YEARS 1-3
  - CONCENTRATED OBSERVATION OF 4 THIRD YEAR CLASSES AND TEACHERS (what kind of 'talk' about the foreign culture and what 'image' transmitted by the teacher)
  - ANALYSIS OF TEXTBOOKS USED IN YEARS 1-3
  - INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS

3 An illustration of learners' knowledge and the impact of teaching

In this illustration of part of our findings, I shall draw mainly on the interviews with pupils in their third year of learning French. I propose to consider first what they knew about one aspect of French culture which we knew from the observation in class was often discussed, namely food and drink. I shall then consider the sources of this knowledge and in particular the role of the teacher.

1 *What did pupils know?*

- they were asked to describe an ordinary meal in France (and to describe different meals in more detail) and to describe what might be a 'special' meal, for example for a birthday or other special occasion.
- in general:
  - they spoke with confidence
  - as a group they gave an adequate and accurate account of ordinary meals (but not special meals)
  - they knew of the reputation of French food but rejected the stereotypes (eg of snails and frogs legs being the staple diet
- as individuals:
  - their perceptions were very diverse(cf quotes 1 and 2)
  - frequently they said that the French eat a lot

(perhaps because the textbook mentions food often
perhaps because they do not eat a lot - illustrating a
contrast between their world and the world of tourism and the
social class of the pupils)
(cf quotes 4 and 5)
- compared with older pupils, those pupils who had not actually
yet begun to learn French had less detailed information to
offer and refered more readily to stereotypes
(cf quote 6)
- these stereotypes are formed by hear-say and by relations
with friends or parents
(cf quote 7)

2 *What were the sources of pupils' knowledge?*

-in class:
(a) the textbook (which appears to determine what is discussed by the teacher:
- 3 kinds of information:
-implicit in the text for teaching the language
(eg liste d'expression utiles: 'un peu de tarte aux
pommes, svp', voilà la moutarde', je prends de la
salade')
-factual and 'objective' accounts of life in France
(eg 2 pages in English on French cooking (chap 13))
-advice given to pupils on how to behave
(eg 'try everything even if it is new'
'try buying interesting things for a pique-nique)
i.e. a lot of information on ordinary meals but not on special meals, which seems to correspond with the results of interviews
(b) the teacher - as seen by the pupils
(the teacher is influenced by the textbook in choice of what to discuss, partly because there was no official syllabus but only that determined by the examinations and the textbook which is written to prepare pupils for the examinations - eg there is no mention of what religions are to be found in France in the textbook and pupils did not seem to know much in interviews).
Taking the views of the pupils on the influence of the teacher the following points were made:
- the teacher gives supplementary and better information than that provided by the textbook
(cf quote 9)
- the teacher introduces into the classroom the kind of experience which the textbook cannot
(cf quote 10)
- the emphasis of the teacher and of the textbook is on languagelearning even though there was evidence that some pupils would prefer something different
(cf quote 11)
The general tone of the teaching prescribed by the textbook is described in his own terms by one pupil:
(cf quote 12)

-outside class
the major influences outside the classroom are:
- visits to France (cf quotes 13, 14, 15)
- television (cf quote16)
- friends and relations (cf quote 17-20)
- occasionally: meetings with French people in England; reading magazines (cf quote 21).

Thus far the account has been based on pupil interviews. Another source is the observations in the classroom carried out throughout one school year. This can be seen at two levels: (a) in terms of a description of the particular account given of the foreign culture by each teacher, and (b) in terms of the 'style' of teaching analysed in terms of a comparison with other teachers.

(a) The account given by one teacher consisted of cultural information based on the language teaching texts; the texts of information in English were not used. The impression that the information was not planned in advance was confirmed by the teacher in an interview at the end of the year. The general effect was to present France as a strange almost bizarre country.

(b) At a second level a comparison can be made with other teachers, for it is difficult to establish absolute characterisations or evaluations. Thus we can estimate - from fieldnotes - whether a teacher speaks 'more' or 'less' about the foreign culture and by what other characteristics this talk is accompanied e.g. presenting artefacts from the country in class, drawing on personal experience of the foreign country, using the foreign language as the means of communication with pupils.

4 Models of teaching and learning about other peoples and cultures

The results of the project - and of the different kinds of analysis - will be presented in terms of descriptive models of the relationships between attitude test results, interview transcript analysis and classroom observations and analyses of different teachers' styles. These models are comparative and limited to the study; there is no claim at this stage that the dimensions of the comparisons and of the models are generalisable. Each model can however be subject to a critique from a particular theoretical viewpoint. This view has been elaborated elsewhere (Byram, 1989). In brief it is argued that the cultural learning element of language learning can be an extension of learners' social worlds, a widening of their "social space" to include cultures and societies other than the nation and ethnic within which they are brought up and socialised. It is not however simply a matter of increasing or adding more of the same kind of experience. To the extent that other societies differ learners are exposed to qualitatively different kinds of experience. Their response can be merely to assimilate the new experience to the culturally-specific ways of thinking they already possess - in which case the process is indeed no more than an increase or adding to existing stores of experience. They can however also - with pedagogical aid - adapt their existing ways of thinking, or adopt new ones , to cope with new experience in a new and more appropriate fashion. Each of the models of teaching and learning can thus be evaluated against this view, namely to what extent they encourage the assimilation of new experience to existing thought processes or propose new ways of thinking and acting in order to accept new experience from other cultures on more appropriate terms.

For example, one teaching and learning style in our study presented culture in terms of meanings for new words which were to be learnt by heart. Those meanings indicate

that the new words are not merely new encodings of known concepts, but they introduce new ways of interpreting specific aspects of reality. Simultaneously the learners' knowledge of reality is extended by vicarious report: the new words and meanings are added to existing words and meanings. Reality and the words required for talking about it are extended. For example, the concept and the word "croissant" are added to the learners' store of knowledge. This kind of extension means however that learners acquire knowledge of another culture within the framework or schemata of their existing cultural knowledge. Aspects of the other culture are presented as they arise from the linguistic corpus to be learnt and are structured in terms of linguistic behaviour for specific situations, rather than in terms of structural relationships with other cultural phenomena. For example, "croissant" is seen as a kind of bread with a strange shape which is eaten at breakfast. It is assimilated to the English concept of "bread" and "breakfast". When Marie Antionette is translated as having said "Let them eat cake" ("Qu'ils mangent de la brioche"), the same phenomenon of cultrual assimilation has taken place; it is not just a question of 'mistranslation'.

A second basis for a critique of the descriptive models we have developed is in the proposal for an 'ideal' model of teaching and learning. This model is also based on a particular theoretical view. Again this has been expounded elsewhere but in short it is a suggestion that the language learner should be seen as an ethnographer, attempting to explore and understand the foreign culture on its own terms - through documents, through fieldwork, through analysis of audio and video recordings, through comparison and contrast with the home culture as seen by others and by themselves. This can and should then be turned on the home culture in order to "make it strange" and give a standpoint from which to re-assess and understand it anew. For in the final analysis, it is not the particular information retained by learners after a period of learning a specific language which is important, but the cognitive and affective change brought about by experience of new worlds. It is above all the capacity to reflect upon and relativise the cultural meanings of the learners' own society which is the most important contribution language teaching cn make to young people's general education.

Note 1

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This project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Further information is available from: Dr MS Byram, School of Education, University of Durham, Durham DH1 1TA, UK

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